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Melbourne's high-flying lawyers: powerful figures on Victoria's legal scene

From gangland lawyers to those taking on powerful institutions and advocating for change, these are Melbourne's most influential lawyers.

Sarah Booth

13 min read September 9, 2021 - 8:00AM

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Are you in sticky situation with the law? Or have you suddenly found yourself on the other side of the thin blue line? Whether you are guilty or not, here's what to expect when you are facing criminal proceedings.

Some of Australia's biggest names have been seen in Melbourne's courtrooms, but it's not always the defendant.

In a high-stakes industry, these are the lawyers who stand out, whether it's for changing clients' lives with precedent-setting rulings or changing the industry with ambitious agendas.

From gangland figure go-tos and community advocates to rising stars and industry veterans, here are the figures are making waves on Melbourne's legal scene.

Zarah Garde-Wilson

The criminal defence lawyer came to prominence during Melbourne's gangland wars, representing the likes of Carl Williams, Tony Mokbel and Rob Karam.

She established her own practice, Garde Wilson Lawyers, while she was still in her 20s, defending notorious underworld figures accused of involvement in multimillion-dollar drug syndicates or plots to kill.

Ms Garde-Wilson said some people looked down on criminal defence lawyers, but they "fail to see the big picture" and their role in pursuing justice.

"We fight for justice for our clients to ensure they are accorded fairness within the system, which in turn is in the best interest of the community," she said.

"In a system reliant on people to implement it, there will always be errors and room for corruption.

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"Without defence lawyers this would largely go unchecked."





Zarah Garde-Wilson. Picture: David Caird

In recent years Ms Garde-Wilson has also been a critic of one of Victoria's more notable alleged corruption cases — Victoria Police's use of "Lawyer X", who was later revealed to be gangland lawyer Nicola Gobbo.

Ms Garde-Wilson has taken on clients whose convictions were thrown into question after it emerged Ms Gobbo had been a secret informant for Victoria Police's Purana task force.

Ms Garde-Wilson said the scandal, [which the Herald Sun first reported on in March 2014](#), it took a toll on her faith in the justice system.

"(My faith) has partially been restored by the court rulings made thus far, yet far more is required to rectify the past injustices and to ensure that it is never repeated," she said.

"My motivation for practising criminal law is quite simple: We are the fine line between justice and injustice.

"I believe our justice system is the best in the world and, while it has failings, it is designed to be able to correct them when they occur and evolve with the society it serves."

Sam Norton

Sam Norton can count Borce Ristevski, imprisoned for the manslaughter of his wife, Karen Ristevski, and Celeste Manno's accused killer, Luay Sako, among the people he has represented in court.

The Sary Norton Halphen partner has worked on other high-profile cases over the years, including the Airbnb party murder of 19-year old Laa Chol, the Essendon doping saga and alleged murder of [missing Brunswick woman Maryam Hamka](#).

But the vice president of Liberty Victoria, who has an interest in human rights cases, can also include defending G20 protesters and Nauru asylum seekers on his resume.

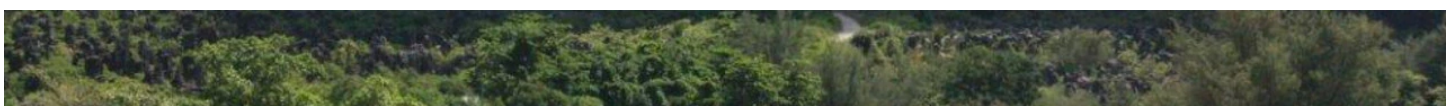
Mr Norton said people always ask "how can you represent people charged with these crimes" but he says it's just part of a larger justice system.

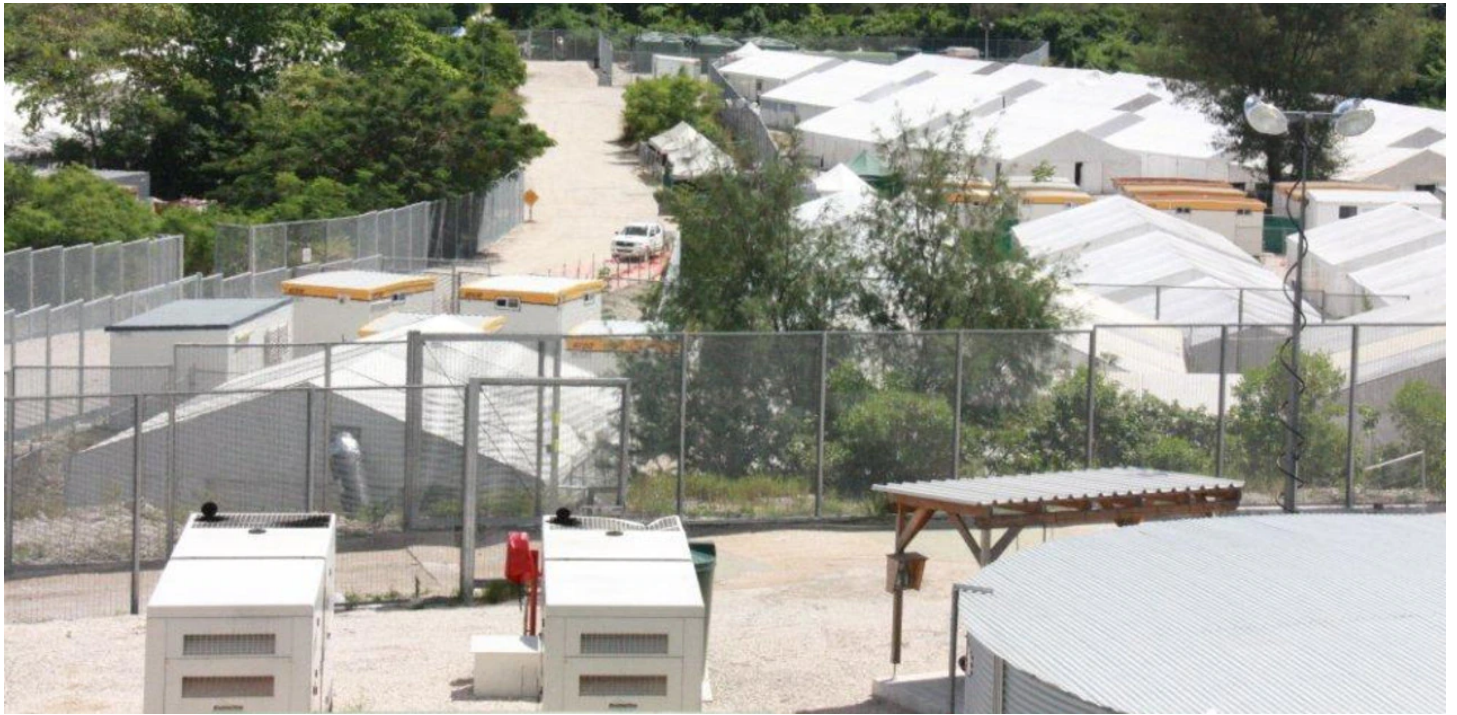
"For it to work, an accused needs to be represented and they need to be prepared well," he said.

"It's never a situation where someone comes in and says 'I'm guilty, get me off'.

"We represent them in court, we provide them with a voice, we act on the instructions.

"It can be difficult at times, it can be rewarding sometimes."





Regional Processing Centre One on Nauru, taken in 2015. Picture: Republic of Nauru

He told the Herald Sun he had “no desire” to be a criminal lawyer at the start of his career until he began working on some cases and discovered his passion.

“I was drawn to it immediately because it involves an individual against the state,” he said.

“The power imbalance is very significant.

“Being able to represent that individual against the state and be a voice for people who often don’t have a voice is something important.”

He said his work successfully defending asylum seekers on Nauru, who were accused of damaging property in 2012, felt like a “moral imperative”.

“These are people who had been plonked on a remote island in the middle of the Pacific for no greater crime than seeking to avoid persecution and they were going to be left unrepresented if we (him and Simon King) didn’t go.

“The consequences if they were found guilty was that they would never have been allowed to settle in Australia, so really, in those circumstances, when you have the capacity to provide assistance to people who otherwise wouldn’t get it, it’s a really important thing to be able to do.”

Ruth Parker

Criminal defence lawyer Ruth Parker says she was “largely unknown” until her 10-year battle to free [Faruk Orman](#) made headlines around the world.

It was July 26, 2019, and Orman had just become the first person to have a conviction overturned as a result of the Lawyer X scandal.

The Victorian Court of Appeal threw out his 2009 conviction for the murder of Victor Peirce after hearing his

lawyer at the time — Nicola Gobbo — had also been informing on him.

Ms Parker had taken on high-profile cases before, including that of Phillip Bracken, a 45-year-old man who was charged with murder but acquitted at trial under new domestic violence self-defence provisions.

But nothing compared to the media swarm waiting outside the courtroom on that July day, when Orman — after more than a decade of professing his innocence — finally cleared his name.



Lawyers Paul Smallwood, Ruth Parker and Carly Marcs Lloyd with Faruk Orman outside the Supreme Court after he was acquitted. Picture: Alex Coppel

Ms Parker said the case was important to her because of the person Orman is and “how strange the case against him was”.

“The evidence just did not stack up and every time the defence made any sort of headway, it was almost as if police knew what we were doing, they could circumvent us in advance of us raising any contrary evidence,” she said.

“It seemed to me he was being corralled towards a conviction in circumstances where I genuinely thought he was innocent and still do.

“I had a deep sense that an injustice had occurred.”

Orman was not Ms Parker's only Lawyer X-related case and she later helped free Zlate Cvetanovski, who had his drug conviction dropped after years in custody.

Ms Parker said working on “a case like Orman and other cases I have done that have changed peoples lives, it gives you a real boost”.

“It makes you keep going in an industry that is hard and recently has been incredibly challenged (with Covid).”

Philip Dunn QC



Philip Dunn, QC, at the old Melbourne Magistrates' Court at RMIT.

Philip Dunn, QC, has been a criminal lawyer for more than 40 years, defending clients charged with everything from murder, conspiracy and corporate fraud to drug and sex offences.

He has represented organised crime figures from the late Carl Williams and the late Comanchero boss Mick Hawi to sporting identities facing serious charges, including Gary Ablett senior and Dani Laidley.

Mr Dunn worked on several cases later dramatised on television, including the 1976 Great Bookie Robbery, believed to be one of the largest Australian armed robberies, and the Matthew Wales double homicide case commonly referred to as the “society murders”.

In an interview with Juliette Brodsky for the Foley's List oral history, the criminal lawyer said he was “incredibly optimistic” about people despite working on “several hundred murder trials or more”.

“I've acted for murderers, psychopaths and the odd guilty person, as well,” he said.

“I've practised in every state. I've been very, very lucky — I'm a fortunate person.

“The day I became a barrister was one of the greatest days in my life; I'd recommend it to everyone.”

Daniel Ajak

In the space of a few years, [Daniel Ajak](#) has co-founded his own law firm and launched the country's first network for African Australian legal professionals.

Mr Ajak, alongside fellow director Natasha Wolan, started Ajak Wolan and Associates at the beginning of the pandemic.

The Flinders University graduate made the move after several years working in multiple areas of law, including criminal, family matters and migration.

The firm is already expanding, taking on another lawyer this year, and Mr Ajak hopes to eventually have offices across "all the major cities".

Mr Ajak launched the African Australian Legal Network after he and some colleagues began discussing the lack of opportunities for graduates without industry connections.





Daniel Ajak. Picture: Ian Currie

The organisation counts law reform advocacy on behalf of African Australians and promotion of members of their community within the legal industry among its goals.

Mr Ajak said his passion for law was inspired by his South Sudanese father's work as a tribal elder, overseeing and advocating matters.

"In short I followed in my dad's footsteps," he said.

"Our goal (for the AALN) is to grow and provide more support for our members.

"I want to see more of our members have their own firms, get appointments to the bench."

Mr Ajak's expertise is in criminal defence work, but he said general practice was important to him so that his community could be represented by someone they trust on all legal matters.

"If they have matters in the coroner's court and they feel we can assist them, I'm there," he said.

"Members of the community who have got businesses, we can provide commercial advice."

Dr Theodosios Alexander

Dr Theodosios Alexander is a criminal and commercial law barrister, who has worked on terrorism, murder and drug trafficking cases.

An associate professor at Deakin Law School, he also has a special interest in white-collar crime.

Dr Alexander said he decided to pursue law after his parents were taken advantage of by a large bank when he was 16 years old.

"I thought to myself, I am going to make sure that I never let this happen to them again, and never let it happen as much as I can help it to someone else," he said.

"I decided the way to do that was to understand the law, and act as the person between authority and abuses of authority and the individual."

Dr Alexander's interest in white collar crime led him to write his PhD on the subject

DR ALEXANDER'S INTEREST IN WHITE COLLAR CRIME LED HIM TO WRITE HIS FIRM ON THE SUBJECT.



Dr Alexander has been involved in a number of widely reported cases, including that of Bourke St driver James Gargasoulas. Picture: Tony Gough

He has also been involved in a number of widely reported cases including Bourke St driver James Gargasoulas and Rob Karam, who is preparing to appeal his sentence for a tinned tomato drug importation plot in the wake of the Lawyer X scandal.

But when asked for his career highlight, Dr Alexander said the publicity was irrelevant.

“They’re all equally important to the client,” he said.

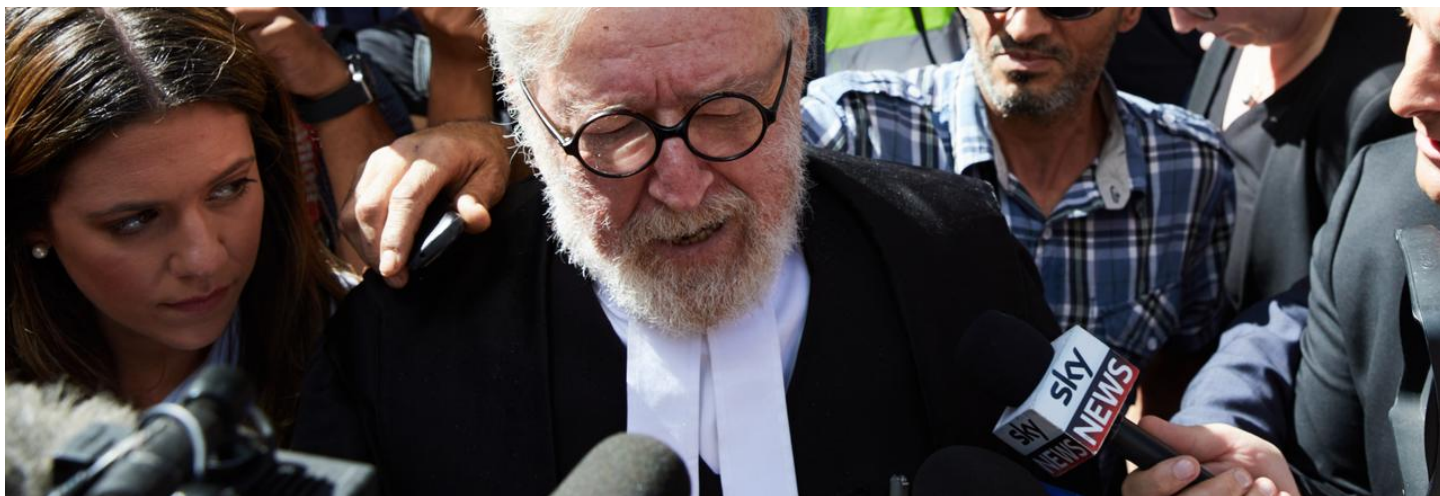
“The highlight is each time a client says they’re innocent, there’s a trial and the jury comes back with a verdict of not guilty.”

Robert Richter QC

The high-profile Crockett Chambers, QC, has overseen some of the biggest cases in recent Australian history, including the 2018 George Pell trial, which made global news.

He’s taken on people who are — and in some cases this would be putting it lightly — disliked by the wider community, including Hoddle St mass murderer Julian Knight.





Robert Richter QC outside Melbourne's County Court during Cardinal George Pell's trial. Picture: Erik Anderson

But Mr Richter is popular among defendants, with underworld figure Domenic "Mick" Gatto even getting his name tattooed across his chest after he was acquitted of shooting Andrew "Benji" Veniamin in 2004.

Mr Richter represented him during the infamous case.

High-profile cases aside, Mr Richter's bio on the Crockett Chambers website points to his work on Royal Commissions and his role as one of the founding members of Victoria's Fitzroy and Aboriginal Legal Services.

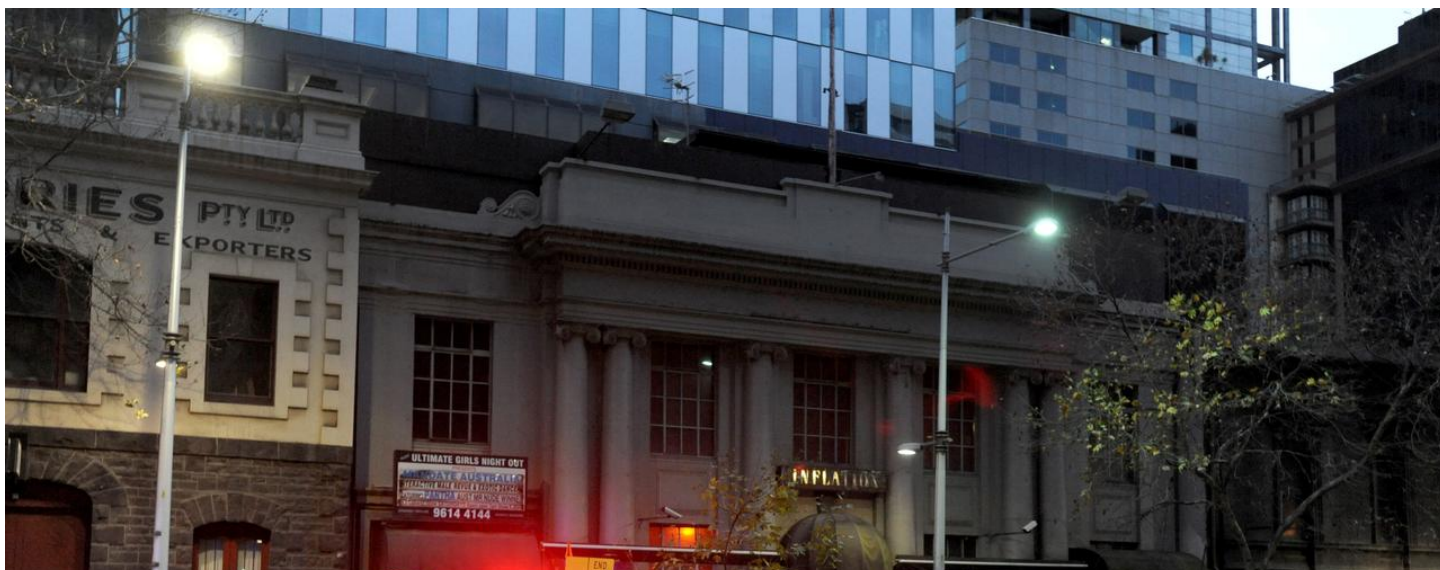
Kim Price

Kim Price specialises in personal injury cases and has successfully taken on institutions including the Catholic Church and Victoria Police, at times winning record payouts.

A partner at personal injury firm Arnold Thomas and Becker, he ran the multimillion-dollar case against law enforcement over the botched 2017 Inflation Nightclub shooting, when Victoria Police fired on unarmed man who had a toy gun as part of a costume.

Victims Dale Ewins and Zita Sukys were awarded a "significant" payout over the incident.

At the time of the court battle, Mr Price said it was "the most significant police shooting compensation claim in the history of the state of Victoria".





Police outside Inflation nightclub on King St after a shooting inside the club. Picture: Andrew Henshaw

He also oversees Arnold Thomas and Becker's institutional abuse practice, which recently secured a [record \\$2m payout](#) for a victim of childhood sexual abuse within the Catholic Church.

The Archdiocese of Melbourne agreed to the compensation — the largest of its kind in Victorian history — after David Kent sued them for the abuse he suffered at the hands of paedophile priest Kevin O'Donnell.

Mr Price was promoted to equity partner at Arnold Thomas and Becker in 2013 after just five years of practice.

Recently he has been working on other high-profile cases, including a class action against the security companies who worked on Victoria's hotel quarantine program last year, and a case against the Tasmanian government over a [paedophile nurse who allegedly abused dozens of children](#).

Jillian Prior

Jillian Prior is the co-founder of the Law and Advocacy Centre for Women, a non-profit organisation that focuses on representing vulnerable women in the criminal justice system.

She launched the centre with Ellie Pappas after ten years as the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service's Principal legal officer.

The centre was founded in response to the growing number of female prisoners, particularly those being held on remand pre-sentence.

It aims to provide a "holistic" approach that addresses underlying issues facing their clients, such as poverty and homelessness, as opposed to just the charges they are facing.

In an interview with her former university, Monash Law School, Ms Prior was described as a public interest lawyer focused on "positive social change".

She said it was important to "listen to the people you are asked to represent".

"Do not be afraid to stomp your foot and be heard on issues that matter," she said.

"Without these voices, those without capacity to be heard will continue to suffer.

"Don't let the bastards wear you down."

Dermot Dann QC





Dermot Dann, QC, outside the County Court. Picture: Andrew Henshaw

Dermot Dann, QC, has represented clients including “the most hated man in Australia”, Porsche driver Richard Pusey, whose comments in the wake of a horror crash that killed four police officers outraged Victorians.

high-profile defendants, such as former Richmond player Jake Ring and Collingwood's Jordan De Gooijer, who prosecutors recently dropped an indecent assault charge against, have also turned to him for help.

When not working on criminal cases, Mr Dann has also appeared for professional athletes in their codes' tribunal hearings.



The 'most-hated man in Australia', Richard Pusey, is one of Dermot Dann's high-profile clients. Picture: Ian Currie

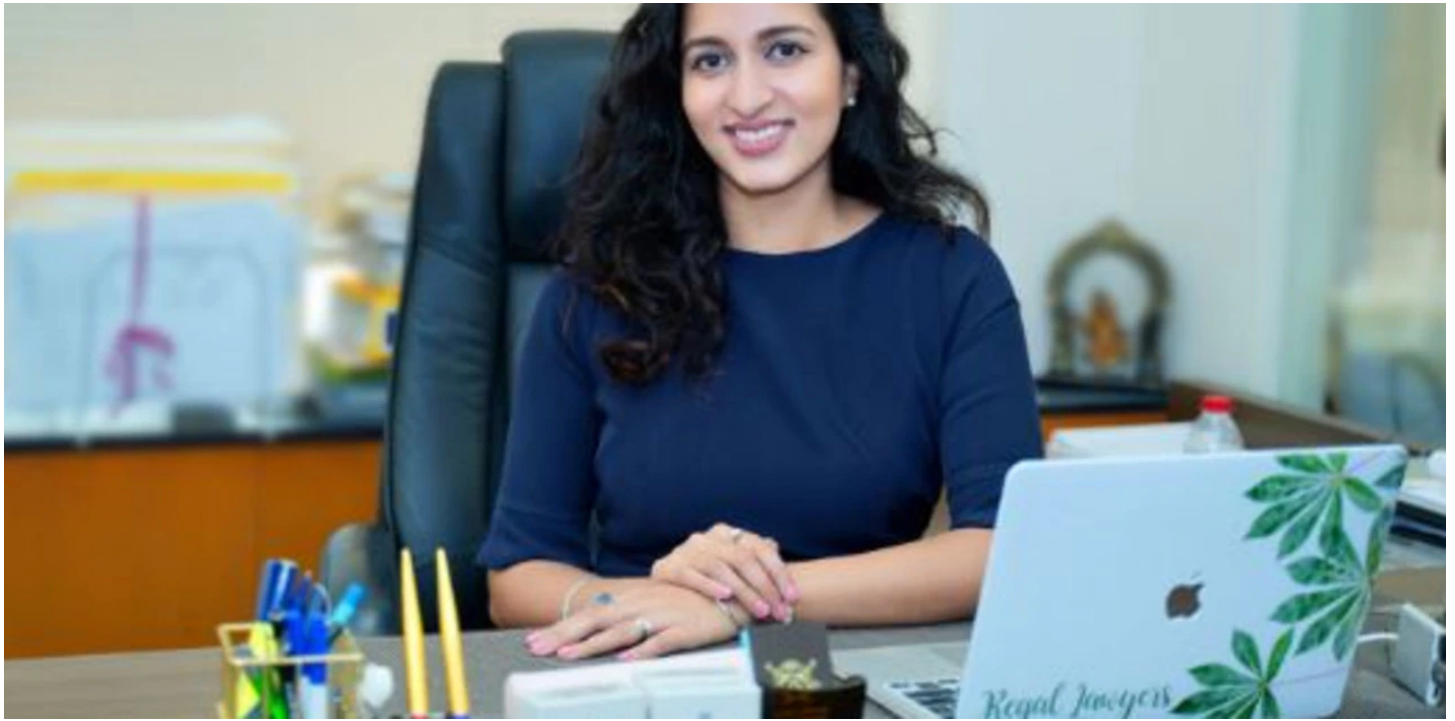
Mannie Kaur Verma

Mannie Kaur Verma is the principal lawyer and partner of Regal Lawyers and Advisors and was a 2021 finalist in Lawyers Weekly 30 under 30 for her Pro Bono work.

She has appeared as a legal commentator in the media, where she has advocated for immigration law reform and diversity in the legal industry.

She is an ambassador for education charity One Girl Australia and the Veer Foundation,

Ms Kaur said her Sikh faith motivated her to pursue law, as she believed in protecting and defending "those who are not able to defend themselves".



Mannie Kaur Verma. Picture: Regal Lawyers and Advisors

“As a lawyer, each day, I have the privilege of helping people navigate through our complex legal system,” she said.

“Each day, I have the ability to empower someone to stand up for their rights.”

She said there is still more to do, and she hopes to encourage others to fight for change, particularly in immigration law.

“My passion for advocacy work stems from the frustration I feel when I am forced to accept and provide legal advice on discriminatory and outdated policies such as the Migration Act.”

“Whilst I accept that we have travelled a long path away from the White Australia policy in 1901 that divided humanity on the basis of ethnicity, we still have more work to do.”

Mark Gumbleton





Mark Gumbleton after his client Wladimir Babaeff was acquitted of the 1993 Myer robbery. Picture: Nicole Garmston

Mark Gumbleton is a criminal barrister who lists drug offences, organised crime, white-collar crime and regulatory issues, including animal cruelty and environmental matters, as his specialties.

He has represented defendants including Mick Gatto's son-in-law, Danny Awad, Comanchero bikie boss Mick Murray and Calabrian mafia figure Saverio Zirilli, who is fighting to overturn his conviction for a 2007 ecstasy bust.

The police bust of 15,193,798 pills inside tomato tins was considered a world record at the time but the case has come under fire due to Nicola Gobbo's role in passing information — a shipping document — on to police.

He has worked on other notable matters including the \$2.3m 1994 Armaguard case and the case of Andrew Lee, who was convicted for the coward-punch death of Eltham teenager Patrick Cronin.

Dr Gumbleton has also completed a doctorate, looking at complicity in homicide, at Monash University.

Antoinette Braybrook

ANTOINETTE BRAYBROOK



Antoinette Braybrook was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll.

Ms Braybook has been the chief executive of Djirra, an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family violence prevention and legal service, for almost 20 years.

The organisation offers both legal advice and other “holistic” supports, while also working on community-based early intervention programs and fighting for law and policy reform.

Ms Braybook, a proud Aboriginal woman, was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women last year and has won several awards for her work.

These include the Law Institute of Victoria's Access to Justice / Pro-Bono Award and the Australian Centre for Leadership for Women award for Sustaining Women's Empowerment in 2015, and in 2017, the Inspirational Women of Yarra Award.

Alongside her Djirra work, she is the co-chair of the Change the Record Campaign and the chief executive of the Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement.

David Hallowes SC





David Hallows, SC, has represented Borce Ristevski and Mark 'Bomber' Thompson.

Chair of the Criminal Bar Association David Hallows was appointed a Senior Counsel in 2016 after almost 20 years in the industry.

One of his more notable cases is that of Borce Ristevski, who became the centre of public outrage after he pleaded guilty to manslaughter just before his murder trial began.

Prosecutors dropped the murder charge after they were unable to prove he intended to kill his wife Karen Ristevski in 2016.

Ristevski is serving a 13-year prison sentence for her manslaughter.

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Karen Ristevski with her husband Borce Ristevski, who has been imprisoned for manslaughter.

Mr Hallowes has also acted for Simiona Tuteru, who is facing manslaughter charges after his employee Mohinder Singh struck and killed four police officers in the horror Eastern Freeway truck crash, as well as working on other widely reported cases including that of Mark “Bomber” Thompson — who was charged with drug possession in 2019 but acquitted of drug trafficking — and convicted paedophile priest Ted Bales.

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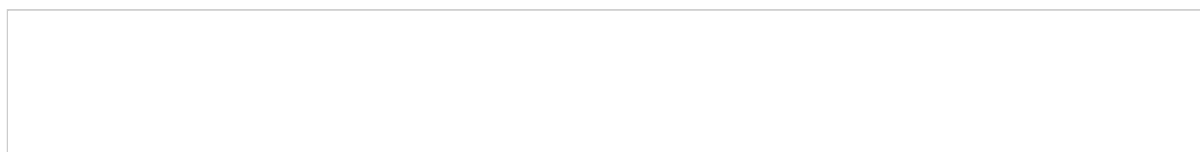
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